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AUTHOR Nolan, Robert R.; Roper, Susan Stavert
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ABSTRACT

One of the reasons educational research does not have greater impact on the classroom, the authors argue, is that researchers are inexperienced in working with practitioners. Based on their experience working with a work/study group composed jointly of school personnel from a San Jose junior high school and faculty members and students from Stanford University, the authors discuss ways to help teachers learn to apply research results to their own classrooms. The discussion is organized around three main suggestions for helping practitioners apply research findings: 1) improving the credibility of the researcher who is working with practitioners, 2) shifting power over the program agenda to the practitioner, and 3) improving program organization and operating procedures. (Author/JG)

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Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, STANFORD UNIVERSITY STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305

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Translating Research Into Practice: Suggestions for Working with Practitioners

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Translating Research Into Practice: Suggestions for Working with Practitioners

Robert R. Nolan and Susan Stavert Roper

Everyone rightly deplores the great gap between educational research and practice. But not everyone has the same explanation. Teachers argue that research is too "theoretical," out of touch, full of jargon and generally useless to them. Researchers complain that teachers don't read research findings, are isolated from one another and from new ideas, and are so protected by tenure that they have little incentive for improving themselves through research or any other means. These explanations may build some warm feelings of group cohesiveness among teachers and among researchers, but they certainly do not provide any guidelines on how to go about bridging the gap or even building a row boat for an occasional foray over to the other side.

We are convinced that an equally plausible explanation for the fact that most educational research does not find its way into the classroom is that researchers have little experience in working with practitioners and inexperience breeds problems. We are veterans of a two-year Teacher Corps Project sponsored by the School of Education at Stanford University and Herbert Hoover Junior High School, San Jose Unified School District, San Jose, California. The major thrust of this project is to apply research findings to improve school and classroom practices.

Our project is based on work/study teams where teachers, administrators, instructional aides, Stanford faculty and graduate students meet to solve practical problems at the Junior High School. Work/study teams were organized as to subject (mathematics, language arts, social studies, and physical education) and cross-disciplinary concerns (multi-cultural education, community involvement, bi-lingual programs, and open space). We were the university members of the Open-Space Work/Study Team. The task of our work/study team was to prepare for the effective utilization of a new open-space school building. This was a formidable undertaking since only one of the Hoover faculty had any experience in an open-space environment and the staff was very apprehensive about teaching in the new facility.

We would like to share the lessons we have learned in trying to establish a climate where teachers become consumers of research by learning how to apply research results to their own classrooms. Our experience has

generated suggestions for researchers in three areas: (1) shifting decision-making power to the practitioner, (2) improving the credibility of the researcher who is working with practitioners, and (3) improving program organization and operating procedures.

1. Shifting decision-making power to the practitioner

We found that practitioners usually knew their needs better than we did. Moreover, they, not us, have to live with the solutions long after we depart. In our program a systematic needs assessment completed by teachers was used to set the agenda for the entire work/study team. We reviewed research in those specific areas of need. In this way power over the agenda of the program was shifted to the practitioners. The researcher supplied resources for the development of solutions to the problems which the teachers had identified. (See Roper and Nolan, 1977).

a. Establish procedures which give the practitioner most decision-making powers.

Teachers should have a voting majority in all decision-making meetings. They also should control any available funds.

b. Encourage teachers and aides to assume leadership responsibilities.

At the beginning stages of your assistance program, try to identify the school's "natural leaders" by observing and talking with teachers and administrators. For example, the chairperson of our work/study team was a forceful, respected member of the faculty who was committed to the work/study team's work. She chaired all meetings, worked with us to set agendas, approved budget expenditures based on decisions made by the work/study team, presented all work/study team products to the faculty for their consideration, organized support for work/study team recommendations and articulated the concerns of faculty and administration.

Be alert to opportunities for teachers and aides to take the initiative concerning a specific issue. For example, after one meeting, a teacher quietly spoke to us of her concern that students were not being involved sufficiently in the plannning process. We encouraged her to chair a subcommittee which

subsequently established specific proposals to increase student participation.

c. When appropriate, act as a buffer between school administrators and teachers.

At times it may be necessary to prevent administrators from dominating your assistance program. We found that the best way to do this is by keeping administrators informed of program activities and to be responsive to their concerns. It will also increase your program's autonomy if it helps accomplish certain goals which normally would have taken the time of administrators. For example, our work/study team prepared a special furniture request and a parent workshop on open space.

2. Improving the researchers' credibility

Research must be sold by researchers. No matter how solid and useful a study, practitioners are not going to buy it if they perceive the researcher as condescending, inaccessible or unresponsive to their needs. Building credibility requires time--time to get to know the school staff and time for them to get to know the researcher.

a. In the initial stages of your program, learn as much as possible about the target school and its staff.

Spend a lot of time informing yourself about the norms, interpersonal relations, governance, and history of the school. Discuss these things with as many people as possible and spend time at the school observing for yourself.

b. Make it clear that your understanding of schools and their problems is not based solely on research.

In our case we both had been secondary public school teachers and in preparation for our project we visited over twenty open-space schools.

c. Do not dismiss what might seem to be trivial problems.

We had to devote time to such questions as whether there should be gum chewing in the new building or bicycle riding on campus. While we could help little with these questions, they were of genuine concern to teachers.

d. Maintain a high degree of visibility at the school site.

We found visibility a crucial factor in teacher's

receptiveness to new ideas. When a new idea was introduced by someone who was highly visible, it was much more likely to be accepted than when presented by a consultant on a one-shot, two-hour workshop.

Especially important to teachers is being in their classes "to see what it is really like". Teachers invited us into their classes to help them with specific problems. We also made presentations to every social studies class to orient students to the new building.

e. Integrate information from research and "the field".

Teachers will be more willing to accept the lessons of research if these lessons are supported by the experiences of fellow practitioners. Teachers see other practicing teachers as the most credible source of information (Reilly and Dembo, 1975). We combined useful information collected during visits to other schools with appropriate information gathered from research in our written and verbal communications with the staff.

3. Improving program organization and operating procedures

Many efforts of collaboration between practitioners and researchers flounder not because of inadequate information or goodwill but because of simple organizational difficulties. Careful attention to the following organizational procedures should enhance the impact of research.

a. Update the original needs assessment.

Periodically make sure that you are providing information and services that are best meeting the needs of the teachers. Needs change and what was appropriate in September might not be so in January. When our project began, teachers expressed the need to meet with veteran teachers from other open-space schools. After discussions with several visiting practitioners, the Hoover staff indicated that they were ready to develop procedures for operating within their new open-space facility.

b. Carefully screen outside consultants.

Many consultants lack credibility, are unfamiliar with the specific school situation, or are simply boring. Visit and interview all potential consultants. Brief them as to

the on-site situation before their presentations.

c. Give careful attention to teachers' time.

Most teachers are overworked and have limited time and energy to devote to in-service activities. Keep all written work short, clear and to the point. Instead of simply recommending articles or studies, prepare short and concise summaries of important points.

d. Conduct your program at the target school.

Shifting the location of the assistance program to the target site not only saves the practitioners' time but also permits the application of research results in the setting where new practices will actually be implemented.

e. Try to achieve a number of specific goals quickly.

Researchers are used to waiting months or even years for results. Teachers who deal with daily "crises" cannot afford to be that patient. Researchers must therefore build into their assistance program some short-term goals with immediate benefits for teachers to win their commitment to more difficult and long-term changes.

f. Disseminate your program products.

Too often work done at one site is never shared. Distribute written products to interested district administrators. Invite them and interested teachers and aides from other schools to observe your project's activities.

Workshops for practitioners are an effective way to disseminate even though they are rarely given by researchers. We developed workshops on open space and team teaching which we have given at schools in other districts and Teacher Corps projects. To reach an even larger audience, we wrote and published practical "how to" articles for practitioners--"How to Survive in the Open-Space School" and "How to Succeed in Team Teaching--By Really Trying".

Conclusion

The suggestions we have made will lead researchers to adopt the additional roles of in-service educators, resource people, and group facilitators. We realize that assuming these roles is not easy, but if researchers want to maximize their impact on educational practices, they must do more than conduct studies and write up their results for research journals.

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